

Poul Anderson - The Lady of the Winds  
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Poul Anderson (tribute website: [128.174.194.59/vaughn/english120/anderson.htm](http://128.174.194.59/vaughn/english120/anderson.htm)),  
one of the Grand Masters who lent particular honor to that title, died  
at the  
end of July 2001.  
He was a professional writer of astonishing competence, varied talents  
and  
interests, and a thoughtful stylist. Distinguished as a fantasy  
writer—The  
Broken Sword (1954) was his first adult novel and is still an under  
appreciated  
fantasy classic—he was principally one of the heroic figures of hard  
science  
fiction, a John W. Campbell man whose stories appeared in  
Astounding/Analog for  
the five decades. Of his many excellent collections, All One Universe is  
perhaps  
the best, since it contains not only first-class stories but also  
several fine  
essays and extensive story notes by Anderson, who has been notably  
reticent in  
his other books. Anderson was an important and influential figure in  
fantasy.  
"The Lady of the Winds" features bard, lover, and thief Cappen Varra. A  
Jack  
Vancean fantasy character of Anderson's introduced in "The Valor of  
Cappen  
Varra," in the 1950s, Varra later reappeared in the 1980s in the  
Thieves' World  
anthologies edited by Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey. It is a lighthearted  
adventure about an encounter with a vain goddess. To get all the musical  
jokes  
here, it helps to know Gilbert & Sullivan, but the story is always clear  
and  
sharp.

Southward the mountains lifted to make a wall across a heaven still hard  
and  
blue. Snow whitened their peaks and dappled the slopes below. Even this  
far  
under the pass, patches of it lay on sere grass, among strewn  
boulders—too early  
in the season, fatally too early. Dry motes blew off in glittery  
streaks, borne  
on a wind that whittered and whirled. Its chill searched deep. Westward,  
clouds  
were piling up higher than the heights they shrouded, full of darkness  
and  
further storm.  
A snow devil spun toward Cappen Varra, thickening as it went. Never had  
he known  
of the like. Well, he had gone forth to find whatever Power was here. He  
clutched the little harp with numbed fingers as if it were his courage.  
The gyre  
stopped before him and congealed. It became the form of a woman taller  
than

himself. She poised utterly beautiful, but hueless as the snow, save for faint blue shadows along the curves of her and eyes like upland lakes. The long, tossing hair and a thin vortex of ice dust half clothed her nakedness. Somehow she seemed to quiver, a wind that could not ever come altogether to rest. "My lady!" broke from him in the tongue of his homeland. He could have tried to stammer on with words heard in this country, but she answered him likewise, singing more than speaking, maybe whistling more than singing: "What fate do you seek, who dared so to call on me?" "I-I don't know," he got out, truly enough. "That lies with my lady. Yet it seemed right to bring her what poor gift was mine to offer." He could not tell whether he heard scorn or a slight, wicked mirth. "A free gift, with nothing to ask in return?" Cappen drew breath. The keen air seemed to whip up his wits. He had dealt with the mighty often before now—none such as her, no, but whatever hope he had lay with supposing that power makes for a certain way of feeling, be it human or overhuman. He swept his headgear off, holding it against his breast while he bowed very deeply. "Who am I to petition my lady? I can merely join all other men in praising her largess and mercy, exalting her name forever." The faintest of smiles touched her lips. "Because of what you brought, I will hear you out." It ceased. Impatience edged her voice. The wind strengthened, the frosty tresses billowed more wildly. "I think I know your wish. I do not think I will grant it. However, speak."

He had meant to depart from Sanctuary, but not so hastily. After some three years in that famous, infamous city, he remembered how much more there was to the wide world. Besides, while he had made friends high in its life, as well as among the low and raffish—with whom he generally felt easier—he had also made enemies of either kind. Whether by arrest on some capital charge or, likelier, by a knife in some nighted alley, one of them might well eventually make an end of him. He had survived three attempts, but the need to stay ever alert grew wearisome when hardly anything remained here that was new to him. For a time after an adventure into which he fell, rescuing a noble lady from captivity in another universe and, perhaps, this world from the sikkintairs, he indulged in pleasures he could now afford. Sanctuary provided them in

rich  
variety. But his tastes did not run to every conceivable kind, and  
presently  
those he enjoyed took on a surprising sameness. "Could it be that the  
gods of  
vice, even the gods of luxury, have less imagination than the gods of  
virtue and  
wholesomeness?" he wondered. The thought appalled.  
Yet it wakened a dream that surprised him when he recognized it for what  
it was.  
He had been supposing his inborn restlessness and curiosity would send  
him on  
toward fresh horizons. Instead, memories welled up, and longing  
sharpened until  
it felt like unrequited love. Westward his wish ran, across plains, over  
mountains, through great forests and tumultuous kingdoms, the whole way  
home to  
Garonne. He remembered not only gleaming walls, soaring spires, bustling  
marts  
and streets; not only broad estates, greensward and greenwood,  
flowerbeds  
ablaze, lively men and livelier women; he harked back to the common  
folk, his  
folk, their speech and songs and ways. A peasant girl or tavern wench  
could be  
as fair as any highborn maiden, and often more fun. He remembered  
seaports,  
odors of tar and fish and cargo bales, masts and spars raking the sky,  
and  
beyond them the water a-glitter beneath a Southern sun, vast and blue  
where it  
reached outward and became Ocean.  
Enough remained of his share of Molin Torchholder's reward for the  
exploit. He  
need not return as a footloose, hand-to-mouth minstrel, showman,  
gambler, and  
whatever-else, the disinherited and rather disgraced younger son of a  
petty  
baron. No, if he could get shrewd advice about investments—he knew  
himself for a  
much better versifier than money manager—he would become a merchant  
prince in  
Croy or Seilles at the very least. Or so he trusted.  
Summer was dying away into autumn. The last trader caravans of the year  
would  
soon be gone. One was bound as far as Arinberg. That was a goodly  
distance, well  
beyond the western border of this Empire, and the town said to be an  
enjoyable  
place to spend a winter. Cappen bought two horses, camp gear, and  
supplies from  
the master. The traders were still trading here, and did not plan to  
proceed for  
another week. Cappen had the interval idle on his hands.  
And so it came about that he perforce left Sanctuary earlier than  
intended.

Candlelight glowed over velvet. Fragrances of incense, of Peridis's  
warmth and

disheveled midnight locks, of love-making lately come to a pause,  
mingled with  
the sweet notes of a gold-and-diamond songbird crafted by some cunning  
artificer. No noise or chill or stench from the streets outside won  
through  
windows barred, glazed, and curtained. Nerigo, third priest of Ils,  
housed his  
newest leman well.  
Perhaps if he visited her oftener she would not have heeded the  
blandishments of  
a young man who encountered her in the gaudy chaos of Midyear Fair and  
made  
occasions to pursue the acquaintance. At least, they might have lacked  
opportunity. But although Nerigo was not without vigor, much of it went  
in the  
pursuit of arcane knowledge, which included practices both spiritually  
and  
physically demanding. Today he had indicated to Peridis, as often  
before, that  
he would be engaged with dark and dangerous powers until dawn, and then  
must  
need sleep in his own house; thereafter, duties at the temple would keep  
him  
busy for an indefinite span.  
So she sent a note to Cappen Varra at the inn where he lodged. It went  
by public  
messenger. As she had made usual, her few servants retired to a  
dormitory shed  
behind the house when she had supped. If she needed any, she could ring  
a bell.  
Besides, like servants generally in Sanctuary, these cultivated a  
selective  
blindness and deafness.  
After all, she must shortly bid her lover farewell. It would probably  
take a  
while to find another. She might never find another so satisfactory.  
"You have asked about some things here," she murmured. "I never dared  
show you  
them. Not that you would have betrayed me, but what you didn't know  
couldn't be  
gotten out of you, were he to become suspicious. Now, though, when,  
alas, you  
are leaving for aye—" She sighed, fluttered her eyelashes, and cast him  
a  
wistful smile. "It will take my mind off that, while we rest before our  
next  
hour of delight."  
"The wait will not be long, since it's you I'm waiting for," he purred.  
"Ah, but, my dear, I am less accustomed than I... was... before that man  
persuaded  
me hither." With gold, Cappen knew, and the luxury everywhere around,  
and, he  
gathered, occasional tales and glimpses of marvels. "Let me rest an  
hour, to be  
the readier for you. Meanwhile, there are other, more rare  
entertainments."  
A long silken shift rippled and shimmered as she undulated over to a  
cabinet of  
ebony inlaid with ivory in enigmatic patterns. Her single, curious  
modesty was  
not to be unclad unless in bath or bed. Having nothing else along,

Cappen gratified it by resuming blouse and breeks, even his soft shoes. When she opened the cabinet, he saw shelves filled with objects. Most he couldn't at once identify, but books were among them, scrolls and codices. She paused, considering, then smiled again and took out a small, slim volume bound in paper, one of perhaps a dozen. "These amuse me," she said. "Let me in turn beguile you. Come, sit beside me."

He was somewhat smugly aware of how her gaze followed him as he joined her on the sofa. Speech and manner counted most with women, but good looks helped. He was of medium size, slim, lithe and muscular because hitherto he had seldom been able to lead the indolent life he would have preferred. Black hair, banged over the brow and above the shoulders, framed straight-cut features and vividly blue eyes. It also helped to have quite a musical voice. She handed him the book. He beheld letters totally unfamiliar, laid it on his lap, and opened it. She reached to turn the pages, one by one. Plain text mingled with lines that must be verse-songs, because it seemed the opening parts were under staves of what he guessed was a musical notation equally strange. There were pictures too, showing people outlandishly clad, drawn with an antic humor that tickled his fancy. "What is this?" he wondered. "The script for a rollicking comedic performance," she answered. "When done? Where? How do you know?" "Well, now, that is a story of its own," she said, savoring his attention. He knew she was not stupid, and wanted to be more to him than simply another female body. Indeed, that was among her attractions. "See you, Nerigo's wizardly questings go into different worlds from ours, alike in some ways, alien in more. Different universes, he says, coexistent with this one on many planes, as the leaves of this tome lie side by side. But I can't really understand his meaning there. Can you?" Cappen frowned, abruptly uneasy. "Much too well," he muttered. "What's wrong? I feel you go taut." "Oh, nothing, really." Cappen made himself relax. He didn't care to speak of the business, if only because that would spoil the mood here. It was, after all, safely behind him, the gate destroyed, the sikkintairs confined to their own skies. And yet, raced through his mind, that gate had been in the temple of Ils, where the high flamen made nefarious use of it. He had heard that, subsequently, the

priests of the cult disavowed and severely discouraged such lore. They could have found themselves endangered. Yet search through the temple archives might well turn up further information. Yes, that would explain why Nerigo was secretive, and stored his gains in this house, where nobody would likely think to search.

"He only lusts for knowledge," Peridis reassured. Her tone implied she wished that were not his primary lust. "He does not venture into the Beyond. He simply opens windows for short whiles, observes, and, when he can, reaches through to snatch small things for later study. Is that so terrible? But the hierarchy would make trouble for him if they knew, and... it might strike at me as well."

She brightened. "He shares with me, a little. I have looked with him into his mirror that is not a mirror, at things of glamour or mirth. I have seen this very work performed on a stage far elsewhere, and a few more akin to it. True, the language was foreign to both of us, but he could discern that the story, for instance, concerns a love intrigue. It was partly at my wish that he hunted about until he found a shop where the books are sold, and cast spells to draw copies into his arcanum. Since then I've often taken them out when I'm alone, to call back memories of the pleasure. Now let me explain and share it with you as well as I'm able." Heavy-lidded, her glance smoldered on him. "It does tell of lovers who at last come together."

He thrust his qualms aside. The thing was in fact fascinating. They began to go through it page by page, her finger tracing out each illustration while she tried to convey what understanding she had of it. His free arm slid behind her.

A thud sounded from the vestibule. Hinges whined. A chill gust bore smells of the street in. Peridis screamed. Cappen knew stabbingly that the bolt on the main door had flung back at the command of its master. The book fell from their hands and they read no more that night.

A lean, grizzle-bearded, squinting man, clad in a silvery robe, entered. At his back hulked another, red-skinned, seven feet tall, so broad and thick as to seem squat, armed with steel cap, leather cuirass, and unfairly large scimitar.

Cappen did not need Peridis's gasp to inform him that they were Nerigo and a Makali bodyguard.

The woman sprang to her feet. As the bard did, the little volume slid off his

lap. Almost without thinking, he snatched it and tucked it down his half-open blouse. A bargaining counter—? For an endless instant, silence held them all. When Nerigo then spoke, it was quite softly, even impersonally. "I somewhat hoped I would prove mistaken. But you realize, Peridis, I cannot afford blind trust in anyone. A sortilege indicated you were receiving a visitor in my absences."

She stepped back, lifting her hands, helpless and imploring. Nerigo shook his head. Did ruefulness tinge his words? "Oh, fear not, my cuddly. From the beginning, I knew you for what you are. It's not rational to wax angry when a cat steals cream or a monkey disarrays documents. One simply makes provision against further untowardness. Why should I deny myself the pleasure that is you? No, you will merely be careful in future, very careful. If you are, then when I want novelty you shall go your way freely, unharmed, with only a minor spell on you to lock your lips against ever letting slip anything about me or my doings."

Cappen heard how she caught her breath and broke into sobs. At the back of his mind, he felt a burden drop off himself. He would have hated being the instrument of harm to her. Not that she had been much more to him than frolic; yet a man wishes well-being for his friends. Besides, killing beautiful young women was a terrible waste. Hope flickered up amidst his dismay. He bowed low. "My lord, most reverend sir," he began, "your magnanimity surpasses belief. No, say rather that it demonstrates, in actual incarnation, the divine benevolence of those gods in whose service you so distinguish yourself. Unworthy though I be, my own humble but overwhelming gratitude—"

Nerigo cut him off. "You need not exercise that flattering tongue which has become notorious throughout Sanctuary," the sorcerer-priest said, now coldly impersonal. "You are no wayward pet of mine, you are a brazen intruder. I cannot possibly let you go unpunished; my demons would lose all respect for me. Furthermore, this is an opportunity first to extract from you everything you know. I think especially about the eminent Molin Torchholder and his temple of Savankala, but doubtless other bits of information can prove useful too. Take him, Yaman."

"No, no, I beg you!" Peridis shrieked, but scrambled aside as the giant advanced. If he was hustled off to a crypt, Cappen knew, he would welcome death when at last it came. He retreated, drawing the knife at his belt. Yaman

grinned. The scimitar hissed forth. "Take him alive," Nerigo called, "but I've ways to stanch wounds once he's disabled." Cappen was no bravo or brawler. Wits were always his weapon of choice. However, sometimes he had not been granted the choice. Thus he went prepared. His knife was not just the article of clothing and minor tool commonly carried by men. It was razor-honed, as balanced as a hawk on the wing. When in his wanderings he earned some coins by a show of prestidigitation, it had often figured in the act. He poised, took aim, and threw. A hoarse, gurgling bellow broke from Yaman. He lurched, dropped his weapon, and went to his knees. Blood spurted. The blade had gone into his throat below the chin. If Nerigo wanted to keep his henchman, he'd be busy for a while. Mainly, Cappen's way out was clear. He blew Peridis a kiss and darted off. A yell pursued him. "You'll not escape, Varra! I'll have you hounded to the ends of the Empire. If they're Imperial troopers who find you, they'll have orders to cut you down on sight. But first demons will be on your trail—" By then he was in the vestibule, retrieving his rapier and cloak, whence he slipped forth into the street. Walls and roofs loomed black along its narrowness. A strip of stars between barely gave light to grope by. Oh, lovely gloom! He kept to one side, where the dark was thickest and there was less muck to step in, and fled as deftly as a thief. What to do? tumbled through his head. The inconspicuous silver amulet hanging on his breast ought to baffle Nerigo's afreets or whatever they were. It protected him against any supernatural forces of less than divine status. At least, so the wizard who gave it to him years ago had said, and so it had seemed to work on two or three occasions since. Of course, that might have been happenstance and the wizard a liar, but he had plenty of worries without adding hypothetical ones. Equally of course, if such a being did come upon him, it could seize him or tear him apart. Physical strength was a physical quality. Likewise for human hunters. Yes, Nerigo would have those out after him, while messengers sped north, south, east, and west bearing his description to castles, cantonments, garrisons, and watchposts. Once he had aroused the indignation of his colleagues, Nerigo would have ample influence to get such an order issued. Cappen's connections to Molin



were too slight—how he wished now that he hadn't thought it best to play  
down  
his role in that rescue—for the high priest of Savankala to give him  
asylum and  
safeguard across the border. Relations between the temples were strained  
enough  
already.  
The westbound caravan wouldn't leave for days. Well before then, Nerigo  
would  
learn that Cappen had engaged a place in it. There were several others,  
readying  
to go in their various directions. He could find temporary refuge and  
get  
information in one of the disreputable inns he knew. With luck, he could  
slink  
to the master of whichever was departing first, give him a false name  
and a  
plausible story, and be off with it—maybe even tomorrow.  
That would cost, especially if a bit of a bribe proved advisable. Cappen  
had  
deposited his money with a reliable usurer, making withdrawals as  
desired.  
Suddenly it might as well be on the Moon. He was back to what lay in his  
pouch.  
It might barely stretch to getting him away.  
He suppressed a groan and shrugged. If his most recent memories were  
dearly  
bought, still, they'd be something to enjoy on an otherwise dismal  
journey.

It was a long annual trek that Deghred im Dalagh and his followers made.  
Northward they fared from Temanhassa in Arechoum, laden with spices,  
aromatics,  
intoxicant herbs, pearls, rich fabrics, cunningly wrought metal things,  
and the  
like, the merchants and hucksters among them trading as they went. The  
route  
zigzagged through desert and sown, village and town, across dunes and  
rivers, by  
highroad and cairn-marked trail, over the Uryuk Ubur and thence the  
cultivated  
plains of the Empire, Sanctuary its terminus. That city produced little  
other  
than crime and politics, often indistinguishable, but goods of every  
kind flowed  
to its marts and profitable exchanges could be made. The return journey  
was  
faster, as direct as possible, to get beyond the mountains before their  
early  
winter closed the passes.  
Well, Cappen consoled himself, this was not the destination he had had  
in mind,  
but needs must, he had never yet seen yonder exotic lands, and maybe he  
could  
improve his luck there.  
It could stand improvement, his thoughts continued. Instead of the  
comforts he  
paid for and forfeited, he had a single scrawny mule, which he must  
frequently

relieve by turning to shank's mare; a greasy third-hand bedroll; two similar changes of clothes and a towel; ill-fitting boots; a cheap knife, spoon, and tin bowl; and leave to eat with the choreboys, not the drovers. However, he remained alive and at large. That was ample cause for cheerfulness, most of the time. Making friends came naturally to him. Before long his tales, japes, and songs generated a liveliness that drew the attention of the merchants. Not long after that, they invited him into their mess. Deghred gave him a decent kaftan to wear while they ate, drank, and talked; everybody concerned was fluent in the Ilsig language, as well as others. "I think you have possibilities, lad," the caravan master said. "I'll lodge you for a while after we come to Temanhassa and introduce you to certain people." He waved his hand. "No, no, not alms. A modest venture, which in the course of time may bring me a modest profit." Cappen knew he had better not seem a daydreamer or a fool. "The tongue of Arechoum is foreign to me, sir. Your men can scarcely teach me along the way." "You're quick to pick things up, I've seen. Until you do, belike I can help." Cappen understood from the drawl and the bearded smile that Deghred meant also to profit from that help, perhaps considerably. Not that he was ever unnecessarily unkind or hostile. Cappen rather liked him. But business was business. At the moment, nothing better was in sight. Beasts and men plodded on. The land rose in Weakening hills. Now and then, when by himself, Cappen took from his meager baggage the book he had borne from Peridis's house and paged through it, puzzling over the text and staves, smiling at the pictures, mainly recalling her and their nights. Thence he harked back to earlier recollections and forward to speculations about the future. It bore him away from the trek. At a lonely fortress on a stony ridge, the commander routinely let them cross the frontier. Cappen drew a long breath. Yet, he realized, that frontier was ill-defined, and Nerigo's agents might still find him. He would not feel altogether safe until he was on the far side of the Uryuk Ubur. Those mountains reared like a horse. Mile by mile the trails grew more toilsome, the land more cold and stark. Unseasonably so, Deghred said, and burned some incense to his little private gods. Nevertheless the winds lashed, yelled, and bit, clouds raced ragged, snow flurried. Thus they came to the hamlet Khangaii and heard that if they went ahead, they would almost surely die.

A storm roared about the huts. Sleet hissed on the blast. Moss-chinked stone walls and turf roof muffled the noise, a dung fire and crowded bodies kept the dwelling of headman Bulak odorously warm, but somehow that sharpened the feeling of being trapped. "Aiala is angry," he said. "We have prayed, we have sacrificed a prime ewe—not in feast, but casting it into a crevasse of Numurga Glacier—yet she rages ever worse." "Nor has she sent me a dream to tell why, though I ate well—nigh all the sacred ulaku left us and lay swooned through two sunrises." His elder wife, who was by way of being the tribal priestess, shuddered. "Instead, nightmares full of furious screams." Flames flickered low on the hearth and guttered in clay lamps. Smoke dimmed what light they gave and blurred uneasy shadows. From the gloom beyond gleamed the frightened stares of Bulak's younger wife and children, huddled on the sheepskins that covered the sleeping dais. Three favored dogs gnawed mutton bones tossed them after the company had eaten. Several men and the senior woman sat cross-legged around the fire, drinking fermented milk from cow horns refilled out of a jug. They were as many as could well have been crowded in, Deghred and such of the merchants as he picked. The rest of the travelers were housed elsewhere. Even in this bad time, hospitality was sacred. Cappen had persuaded the caravan master that he, come from afar, might conceivably have some new insight to offer. He was beginning to regret the mix of cockiness and curiosity that led him to do so. He had more or less gotten to ignoring the stench, but his eyes stung and he kept choking back the coughs that would have been impolite. Not that things were likely any better in any other hut. Well, maybe he could have slept. It was a strain trying to follow the talk. Bulak knew some Ilsig, and some of the guests had a smattering of his language. Between stumbling pidgin and awkward translations, conversation did not exactly flow. At least, though, the slowness and the pauses gave him a chance to infer what he could not directly follow, correcting his mistakes when context revealed them to him. It became almost as if he listened to ordinary speech. He wasn't sure whether or not the drink helped, if only by dulling his discomfort. Foul stuff,

but by now his palate was as stunned as his nose and he readily accepted recharges,  
"Have you not gods to appeal to other than this--this Aiala?" asked the merchant  
Haran im Zeyin.  
Deghred frowned at the brashness and shook his head. The wife caught her breath  
and drew a sign which smoke-swirls traced. Bulak took it stolidly. "She rules  
the air over the Uryuk Ubur," he answered. Light wavered across the broad,  
seamed face, almond eyes, and thin beard. "What shall they of the Fire, the  
Earth, and the Water do?"  
"It may be she is even at odds with them, somehow, and this is what keeps her  
wrathful," whispered the woman. "There is a song among the olden songs that  
tells of such a time, long ago, when most of the High Folk died before she grew  
mild again--but I must not sing any of those songs here."  
"So it could worsen things to call on them," said Deghred with careful gravity.  
"Yet--may she and you bear with an ignorant outsider who wishes only to understand-- why should she make you suffer? Surely you are blameless."  
Bulak half shrugged. "How else shall she vent her anger than in tempest and  
chill?"  
Irreverence grinned within Cappen. He remembered infuriated women who threw  
things. The grin died. Men were apt to do worse when beside themselves, and be  
harder to bring to reason. More to the point, he happened to be on the receiving  
end.  
The headman's stoicism gave way for a moment. "I have had my day. Our tribe will  
live through the winter--enough of us--I think--and may hope that then she has  
calmed--"  
"For she is not cruel," the priestess said as if chanting. "Her snows melt  
beneath her springtime breezes and fill the streams, while the pastures turn  
green and starry with tiny flowers and lambs frisk in the sunshine. She brings  
the fullness of summer, the garnered riches of autumn, and when her snows have  
returned we have been snug and gladsome."  
Isn't that the sort of thing a goddess or god is supposed to do? thought Cappen.  
"--but how many of our young will freeze or starve, how many of our littlest  
ones?" croaked Bulak. He stiffened his lips. "We must wait and see."  
And, Cappen reflected, few gods are noted for tender solicitude. In fact, they  
often have nasty tempers.  
If this is even a goddess, properly speaking. Maybe she ranks only as a sylph or  
something, though with considerable local power. That could make matters even

worse. Minor functionaries are notoriously touchy.  
Supposing, of course, there is anything in what I've been hearing.  
Deghred said it for him: "Again I pray pardon. No impertinence is meant.  
But is  
it not possible that what we have met is merely a freak, a flaw in the  
weather,  
nothing for the Lady Aiala to take heed of, and very soon, perhaps  
already  
tomorrow, it will go back to what it should be?"  
Bulak shook his head. "Never in living memory have we suffered aught  
like this  
so early: as well you should know, who have passed through here, to and  
fro, for  
year after year. But there is the sacred song... Push on if you will. The  
higher  
you go, the harder it will be. Unless we get respite within the next  
three or  
four days, I tell you that you will find the passes choked with snow and  
yourselves in a blizzard, unable even to go back. If afterward your  
bodies are  
found, we will make an offering for your souls." His smile held scant  
mirth.  
"Not that I'm at all sure 'we' means anyone here tonight."  
"What, then, do you counsel we should do?"  
"Why, retreat while still you are able. Tomorrow, I'd say. We cannot  
keep you  
through such a winter as is upon us. Barely will we be able to keep  
ourselves—some of ourselves. Go back north into the lowlands and wait.  
Could we  
High Folk do likewise, we might well, but if naught else, the Empire  
would seize  
on the chance to make us impoverished clients. We have had dealings with  
it ere  
now. Better that a remnant of us stay free. You, though, need but wait  
the evil  
out."  
"At cutthroat cost," muttered Haran.  
"Better to lose our gains than our lives," retorted Deghred. His tone  
gentled.  
"And yet, Bulak, we are old friends, you and I. A man should not turn  
his back  
on a friend. Might we, your guests, be able to do something? Maybe,  
even, as  
foreigners, give reverence and some unique sacrifice to the Lady, and  
thus  
please her—?" His voice trailed off.  
"How shall we speak to her? In our broken Uryuk?" wondered another  
merchant.  
"Would that not be an insult?"  
"She is of the winds," said Bulak. "She and her kind ken every tongue in  
the  
world, for the winds hear and carry the knowledge to each other." He  
turned to  
his elder wife. "Is that not so?" She nodded.  
Deghred brightened. "Then she will understand us when we pray and make  
offerings."  
The priestess pinched her lips together above the few teeth left her.  
"Why  
should she heed you, who are out-landers, lowlanders, have never before  
done her  
homage, and clearly are now appealing only to save—not even your lives,

for you  
can still escape, but your mongers' profits?"  
"Treasure? We have jewelry of gold, silver, and gemstones, we have  
garments fit  
for queens—"  
"What are such things to Air?"  
"To Earth, maybe," Bulak put in. "Aromatic woods might please Fire,  
spices and  
sweetmeats Water. Yet with them, too, I fear you would be unwise."  
Shrewdly:  
"For in no case will you offer your entire freight, when you can better  
withdraw  
and come back with most of it several months hence. It is... not well to  
try to  
bargain with the Powers."  
That depended on which Powers, Cappen thought. He knew of some—but they  
were  
elsewhere, gods and tutelaries of lands less stark than this.  
The drink was buzzing in his head. Dismay shocked through. Why am I  
jesting?  
It's my life on the table tonight!  
Slowly, Deghred nodded. The one sensible thing for his caravan to do was  
retreat, wait out the winter, and cut its losses as much as might be.  
Wasn't it?  
And absolute lunacy for Cappen Varra. Once he was back in the Empire, he  
himself  
would not bet a counterfeit lead bawbee on his chance of getting away  
again. The  
alert was out for him. If nobody else noticed first, one or another of  
his  
fellow travelers was bound soon to hear the description and betray him  
for the  
reward. Fleeing into the hinterlands or diving into some thieves' den  
would  
hardly buy enough time. Though his amulet might keep Nerigo's demons off  
his  
direct track, they could invisibly watch and listen to others,  
everywhere, and  
report everything suspicious to the sorcerer.  
Stay here in Khangaii? Surely the villagers could feed one extra mouth.  
He'd pay  
them well, with arts and shows, entertainments such as they'd never  
enjoyed  
before, keeping heart in them through the grim time ahead.  
Maybe they'd agree. Then maybe he'd starve or freeze to death along with  
so many  
of them. Or maybe Nerigo would get word of a vagabond who'd joined the  
men of  
Arechoum and stayed behind when they returned. He was not yet too far  
beyond the  
Imperial marches for a squad to come after him as soon as the ways  
became at all  
passable.  
Deghred barked a harsh laugh. "Yes, most certainly not to dicker and  
quibble  
with a female already incensed," he said. "That would be to throw oil on  
a  
fire." He sighed. "Very well, we'll load up again tomorrow and betake  
ourselves  
hence. May we find it well with the High Folk when we come back."  
The younger wife moaned softly in the shadows and clutched two of the

children  
to her.  
Let her live, Cappen thought wildly. She's beautiful. Several of them  
that I've  
spied here are, in their way. Though I don't suppose I can beguile any—  
His heart leaped. His legs followed. The others stared as he sprang to  
his feet.  
"No, wait!" he cried. "Wait only a little span. A few days more at most.  
I've an  
idea to save us!"  
"What, you?" demanded Deghred, while his traders gaped and Bulak  
scowled. "Has a  
yawanna taken your wits? Or have you not understood what we were saying,  
how  
easily we can give the Lady offense and bring her fury straight against  
us?"  
"I have, I have," Cappen answered frantically. "My thought is nothing  
like that.  
Any risk will be wholly my own, I swear. Only hearken to me."  
Risk indeed. A notion born out of half-drunken desperation, maybe. But  
maybe,  
also, sired by experience.  
He called up coolness, to be a wellspring for a spate of eager, cozening  
words  
such as a bard and showman had better always be able to produce.

Day came bleak and bright. Washed clean, newly smooth-shaven, wearing  
the finest  
warm raiment to be found in the caravan's goods—plumed cap of purple  
satin,  
scarlet cloak, green tunic embroidered with gold and trimmed with sable,  
dark-blue hose, buskins of tooled leather—with a small harp in his hand  
from the  
same source, he left the village behind and made his way on up the path  
toward  
the heights. Wind whistled. Far overhead, a hawk rode it. The chill  
whipped his  
face. He hardly felt it, nor any weariness after sleepless hours. He was  
strung  
too taut.  
But when he reached the cairn they had told him of, from which rose a  
pole and  
flew an often-renewed white banner, while a narrow trail wound off to  
the left,  
an abrupt sense of how alone he was hollowed him out. Though he seldom  
thought  
about it, his wish was to die, sometime in the distant future, with a  
comrade or  
two and a girl or three to appreciate his gallantry and his last quip.  
He stiffened his sinews and summoned up his blood. He must not seem to  
be  
afraid, so best was to convince himself that he wasn't. Think rather of  
this as  
a unique challenge.  
The trail went across the mountainside, near the edge of a cliff  
sheering down  
into dizzy depths. Elsewhere the land reached vast and tilted, here and  
there a  
meadow amidst the rock. A waterfall gleamed like a sword across the

gorge. Its  
booming came faintly through the wind.  
Before long he reached the altar where they prayed and sacrificed to  
Aiala, a  
great boulder squared off and graven with eroded symbols. Cappen saw few  
if any  
other traces of man. No sacred smoke, but thin gust-borne streamers of  
dry snow  
blew past. Here, though, if anywhere, she should quickly discern any  
worshipper.  
He took stance before the block and turned his gaze aloft. Give her a  
short time  
to see, perhaps to wonder, perhaps even to admire.  
The air shrilled.  
Cappen tucked gloves into belt and positioned the harp. His fingers  
evoked the  
first chord. He began to sing.  
It was a song he had used more than once over the years, usually to good  
effect.  
Of course, it must be adapted to each occasion, even rendered into a  
different  
language, and he had lain awake working on it. However, if she really  
did know  
all human tongues, he could simplify the task by staying with the  
original  
Caronnais. If not, or if he was mistaken about her femaleness—he  
wouldn't weaken  
his delivery by fretting about that. He sang loud and clear:  
Be merciful, I pray, and hear my cry  
Into the winds that you command. I know  
That I am overbold, but even so  
Adore the one whose queendom is the sky,  
In awe of whom the moonlit night-clouds fly,  
Who dances in the sunlight and the snow,  
Who brings the springtime, when the freshets flow  
And all the world goes green beneath her eye.  
yet worship is not that which makes me call  
Upon you here, and offer up my heart.  
Although I, mortal, surely cannot woo  
As man to maiden, still, I have seen all—  
No, just a little, but at least a part— Of that alive enchantment which  
is you.  
And she came to him.  
"—However, speak," she said.  
He suppressed a shiver. Now he must be as glib as ever in his life.  
"First, will  
my lady permit that I resume my cap and gloves and pull my cloak around  
me? It's  
mortal cold for a mortal."  
Again something like amusement flickered briefly. She nodded. "Then say  
what is  
your name, your home, and your errand."  
"May it please my lady, the caravaneers I travel with know me as Peor  
Sardan of  
Lorace." He was clearly from such parts. "But you of the high heavens  
surely  
recognize that this cannot be quite so." Really? Well, anyhow, outright  
prevarication could be hazardous and should be unnecessary. She won't  
deign to  
give me away. If she chooses to destroy me, she'll do it herself.  
Battered to



death by hailstones—? "My motherland is farther west and south, the kingdom of Caronne, and I hight Cappen Varra, born to the noble house of Dordain. As for my errand, I have none fixed, being a wanderer—in spite of the birth I mentioned—who wishes to see something of the world and better his fortune before turning home. Rather, that was my only wish until this happy day."

"Yes, I've spied the pack train," said Aiala scornfully. "You hope I'll grant you better weather."

"Oh, my lady! Forgive me, but no. Who am I to petition you? Nor am I in their enterprise. I simply took what appeared to be an opportunity to visit their country, of which go many fabulous accounts. Now I see this for the velleity it was." He made his look upon her half shy, half aglow. "Here I find the fulfillment of my true and lifelong desire."

Was she taken a bit aback? At any rate, her manner grew less forbidding.

"What do you mean?"

Cappen gestured from beneath his cloak. "Why, my lady, what else than the praise of Woman? She, the flower of earthly creation, in her thousandfold dear incarnations, no wine so sweet or heady as her presence, she is the meaning of my existence and my poor verses in her honor are its justification. Yes, I have found her and sung to her in many a land, from the soft vales of Caronne to the stern fjords of Norren, from a fisher hut on Ocean shore to a palace in Sanctuary, and my thought was to seek her anew in yonder realm, perhaps some innocent maiden, perhaps some wise enchantress, how can I know before she has kindled my heart?"

"You are... a flighty one, then." She did not sound disapproving—what constancy has the wind?—but as though intrigued, even puzzled.

"Also, my very love drives me onward. For see you, my lady, it is Woman herself for whom I quest. While often wondrous, no one woman is more than mortal. She has, at most, a few aspects of perfection, and they changeable as sun-sparkles on the river that is time. Otherwise, the flaws of flesh, the infirmities of insight, the narrowness of dailiness belong to being human. And I, all too human, lack strength and patience to endure such thwarting of the dream for long. The yearning overtakes me and I must be off again in search of that prize which common sense tells me is unattainable but the spirit will not ever quite let me despair of."

Not bad, Cappen thought. By now he half believed it.

"I told you to speak in few words." Aiala didn't say that quite firmly.

"Ah, would that I could give you obedience in this as I shall in all

else  
whatsoever," Cappen sighed into the wind. "Dismiss me, and of course I  
will  
depart, grieving and yet gladsome over what has been vouchsafed me. But  
until  
then I can no more curb my tongue than I can quell my heart. For I have  
glimpsed  
the gates of my goal, loftier and more precious than any knight before  
me can  
have beheld, and I jubilate."  
"And never before have I—" escaped from her. She recalled her savage  
dignity.  
"Clarify this. I'll not stand here the whole day."  
"Certainly not. The heights and the heavens await your coming. But since  
you  
command me, I can relate quite plainly that, hitherbound, I heard tell  
of my  
lady. Beyond, perhaps over and above her majesty and mightiness, the  
tales were  
of visions, dazzlements, seen by an incredibly fortunate few through the  
centuries, beauty well-nigh too great to bear—and, more than that, a  
spirit  
lordly and loving, terrible and tender, mysterious and merry, life-  
bearing and  
life-nourishing—in short, Woman."  
"You... had not seen me... earlier," Aiala murmured.  
"But I had, fleetingly, fragmentarily, in dreams and longings. Here, I  
thought,  
must be Truth. For although there are doubtless other goddesses of whom  
something similar can be said, and I imply no least disrespect for any,  
still,  
Truth is One, is it not? Thus I strove to infer a little of the  
immortally  
living miracle I heard of. I wove these inferences into a humble  
tribute. I  
brought it to your halidom as my offering."  
"To do worship is an end and a reward in itself. I dared hope for no  
more.  
Now—my lady, I have seen that, however inadequate, my verse was not  
altogether  
wide of the mark. What better can an artist win than such a knowledge,  
for an  
hour of his few years on Earth? My lady, I can die content, and I thank  
you."  
"You—need not die. Not soon. Go back to the plains."  
"So we had decided, the caravaners and I, for never would we defy our  
lady's  
righteous wrath. Thence I will seek to regain my faraway birthland, that  
my  
countrymen too may be enriched by a hint of your glory. If I fall by the  
wayside—" Cappen shrugged. "Well, as I said, today my life has had  
overflowing  
measure."  
She raised her brows. "Your road is dangerous?"  
"It is long, my lady, and at the outset—I left certain difficulties  
behind me in  
the Empire—trivial, but some people overreact. My plan had been to  
circumvent  
them by going roundabout through Arechoum. No matter. If the cosmic  
cycle  
requires that my lady decree an early winter throughout her mountains, I

shall  
nevertheless praise her while blood beats within me."  
"It's not that." Aiala bridled. The wind snarled. "No! I am not bound to  
a  
wheel! This is my will."  
"Your wisdom."  
"My anger!" she yelled. The storm in the west mounted swiftly higher.  
"I'll show  
them! They'll be sorry!"  
"They?" asked Cappen low.  
"Aye, they'll mourn for that they mocked me, when the waters of Vanis  
lie frozen  
past the turning of the springtime, and the earth of Orun remains  
barren, and  
the fires of Lua smolder out because no dwellers are left alive to tend  
them."  
Under his cloak, Cappen suppressed a shudder. Yes, he thought, human  
rulers  
don't take their subjects much into account either. "Then they'll come  
to me  
begging my mercy, and I will grant it to them for a song."  
I'm on the track. "But is it not my lady of the winds who sings to the  
world?"  
Cappen pursued, carefully, carefully.  
"So they'll discover, when I laugh at their effort."  
"I am bewildered. How could any being, divine or not, possibly quarrel  
with my  
lady?"  
Aiala paced to and fro. The wind strengthened, the dark clouds drew  
closer.  
After a stark minute she halted, looked straight at him, and said, "The  
gods  
fall out with each other now and then." He forebore to mention that he  
well knew  
that. His need was for her to unburden herself. His notion that she was  
lonelier  
than she realized seemed the more likely when her tone calmed somewhat.  
"This—"  
She actually hesitated. "You may understand. You are a maker of songs."  
"I am when inspired, my lady, as I was today." Or whenever called for,  
but that  
was beside the immediate point.  
"You did well. Not that they could have appreciated it."  
"A song was wanted among the gods?"  
Locks streamed and tumbled the more wildly as she nodded. "For a  
wedding, a  
divine marriage. Your countrymen must perceive it otherwise, but in  
these  
uplands it is Khaiantai who wakens at the winter solstice from her  
sleep, a  
virgin, to welcome Hurultan the Lightbearer, her bridegroom; and great  
is the  
rejoicing in Heaven and on Earth."  
On Earth in better years, Cappen thought. Yes, the mythic event, forever  
new and  
forever recurrent. A chill passed up his spine. He concealed it as best  
he was  
able.  
"But... the occasion is not always the same?"  
"No. Is one day the same as the last? Time would come to a stop."  
"So—the feast and—" his mind leaped—"gifts to the happy pair?"

"Just so. Of us Four, Orun may bring fruits or gold, Vanis a fountain or a rainbow, Lua an undying lamp or a victorious sword—such things as pertain to them—while I have given an eagle or a fragrance or—we go there together; for we are the Four."

"But now lately—?"

Her reasonableness began to break. "I had in mind a hymeneal song, like none

heard before in those halls but often to be again. They agreed this would be a

splendid gift. I created it. And then—" Elemental rage screamed through an icy

blast.

"And they did not comprehend it," Cappen proposed.

"They scoffed! They said it was so unworthy they would not come to the feast in

my company if I brought it. They dare!"

Cappen waited out the ensuing whirlwind. When Aiala had quieted down a grim

trifle, he ventured, "My lady, this is often the fate of artists. I have learned

how eloquence is meaningless to the word-blind, music and meter to the tone-deaf, subtlety to the blunt-brained, and profundity to the unlearned."

"Good names for these, Cappen Varra."

"I refer to no gods or other high Powers, my lady," he made haste to reply. One

never knew who or what might be listening. "No irreverence. Absolutely never! I

speak merely of my small human experience and of people whom I actually pity

more than despise—except, to be sure, when they set themselves up as critics.

Yet even persons of unimpeachable taste and discernment can have differences of

opinion. This is an unfortunate fact of life, to which I have become resigned."

"I will not be. Moreover, word has gotten about. If I come lamely in with

something else than a song—No!" Aiala yowled. "They'll learn respect when I

avenge my pride with disasters like none since Chaos rebelled in the beginning."

"Ah—may that perhaps conceivably be just a minim extreme, my lady? Not that I

can judge. Indeed, I am baffled to grasp how your colleagues could reject your

epithalamium. The music of the wind pervades the world, lulling breeze, sigh in

forests, laughterful rainsquall, trumpeting gale, oh, infinite is its variety,

and its very hushes are a part of the composition," said Cappen with another

sweeping gesture.

She nearly thawed. "You, though, you understand me—" she breathed. "For the

first time ever, someone—"

He intended to go on in this vein until he had softened her mood enough for her

to stop punishing the land. But she paused, then exclaimed, "Hear what I have made, and judge."  
"Oh, my lady, I cannot!" gasped Cappen, aghast. "I'm totally unworthy, unfit, disqualified."  
She smiled. "Be not afraid," she said quite gently. "Only tell me what you think. I won't take offense."  
Too many others had insisted on declaiming their verses to him. "But, my lady, I don't know, I cannot know the language of the gods, and surely your work would lose much in translation."  
"Actually," she said, "it's in classical Xandran, as we're wont to use when elegance is the aim."  
He remembered white temples and exquisite sculptures in the South and West, too often ruinous, yet still an ideal for all successor peoples. Evidently the local deities felt that, while their worshippers might be barbarians, they themselves ought to display refinement. "But I also fear—I regret—my lady, I was not very dedicated to my schooling. My knowledge of Xandran was slight at best, and has largely rusted out of me." True enough.  
Impulsive as her winds, she smiled afresh. "You shall have it back, and more."  
"That would, er, take a while."  
"No. Hear me. All tongues spoken by men anywhere are open to me." Yes, so Bulak had said. How remote and unreal the Uryuk hut felt.  
"For the sake of your courteous words, Cappen Varra, and your doubtless keen judgment, I will bestow this on you."  
He gaped. "How—how—And how can this weak little head of mine hold so overwhelmingly much?"  
"It need not. Whenever you hear or read a language, you will be able to use it like a native. Afterward and until next time, there will be only whatever you choose to keep and can, as with ordinary memories."  
"My lady, I repeat, I'm wholly unworthy—"  
"Hold still." Imperious, she trod over to him, laid hands on his cheeks, and kissed him.  
He lurched, half stunned. A forefinger slid into either ear. He noted vaguely amidst the tempest that this was a caress worth trying in future, if he had a future.  
She released him and stepped back. His daze faded and he could pay close heed to what he said. "I, I never dreamed that Woman herself would—For that instant I was like unto a god."  
Her hand chopped the air, impatient. "Now you are ready to hear me." He braced for it.  
Gaze expectant upon him, she cleared her throat and launched into her song.

Fantastically, the Xandran lyrics rang Caronnais-clear. He wished they didn't.  
As for the melody, she possessed a marvelous voice, but these notes took a drunkard's walk from key to key.  
The universe has looked forward with breath baited, Not only Earth but the underworld and the starrysky,  
For this day so well-known, even celebrated, When all of us assembled see eye to eye

About the union of our shiny Hurultan, whose ability

It is the daylight forward to bring,

And dear Khaiantai, who will respond with agility,  
So that between them they become parents of the spring-  
Cappen thanked the years that had taught him acting, in this case the role of a gravely attentive listener.

Aiala finished: "'-And thus let us join together in chorusing my song.' There!

What do you think of that?"

"It is remarkable, my lady," Cappen achieved.

"I didn't just dash it off, you know. I weighed and shaped every word.

For

instance, that line 'Birds also will warble as soon as they hatch from the egg.'

That did not come easily."

"An unusual concept, yes. In fact, I've never heard anything like it."

"Be frank. Tell me truly, could I make a few little improvements?

Perhaps-I've

considered-instead of 'as ardent as a prize bull,' what about 'as

vigorous as a

stud horse'?"

"Either simile is striking, my lady. I would be hard put to suggest any possible

significant changes."

Aiala flared anew. "Then why do Orun, Vanis, and Lua sneer? How can they?"

"Sneering comes easily to some persons, my lady. It is not uncommonly an expression of envy. But to repeat myself, I do not propose that that applies in

the present case. Tastes do differ. Far be it from me to imagine how your

distinguished kindred might perceive a piece like this. Appropriateness to an

occasion need have nothing to do with the quality of a work. It may merely

happen to not quite fit in- like, say, a stately funeral dirge in a series of

short-haul chanties. Or vice versa. Professionals like me," said Cappen forbearingly, "must needs learn to supply what may be demanded, and

reserve our

true art for connoisseurs."

He failed to mollify her. Instead, she stiffened and glared. "So! I'm unskilled,

am I? I suppose you can do better?"

Cappen lifted his palms with a defensiveness not entirely feigned. "Oh, absolutely not. I simply meant—"

"I know. You make excuses for them on behalf of your own feelings."  
"My lady, you urged me to be forthright. I hint at nothing but a conceivable,  
quite possibly hypothetical reconsideration of intent, in view of the context."  
Indignation relieved him by yielding to haughtiness. "I told you how I would  
lose honor did I by now give anything but a song. Rather will I stay home and  
make them sorry."  
Cappen's mind leaped like a hungry cat at a mouse. "Ah, but perhaps there is a  
third and better way out of this deplorable situation. Could you bring a different paean? I know many that have enjoyed great success at nuptial gatherings."  
"And the gods will know, or in time they'll discover, that it is not new in the  
world. Shall I bring used goods to the sacred wedding-?"  
"Well, no, my lady, of course not."  
Aiala sniffed. "I daresay you can provide something original that will be good  
enough."  
"Not to compare with my lady's. Much, much less exalted. Thereby, however, more  
readily blending into revelry, where the climate is really not conducive to  
concentrated attention. Grant me time, for indeed the standard to be met is  
heaven-high-"  
She reached a decision. "Very well. A day and a night."  
"Already tomorrow?" protested Cappen, appalled.  
"They shall not think I waver weakly between creativity and vengeance. Tomorrow.  
In classical Xandran. Fresh and joyous. It had better be."  
"But-but-"  
"Then I will give you my opinion, freely and frankly."  
"My lady, this is too sudden for imperfect flesh and feeble intelligence. I beg  
you-"  
"Silence. It's more than I think I would grant anyone else, for the sake of your  
respectful words and song. I begin to have my suspicions about it, but will  
overlook them if you bring me one that is acceptable and that my winds can tell  
me has never been heard before on this earth or in its skies. Fail me, and your  
caravan will not get back to the plains, nor you to anywhere. Go!"  
In a whirl of white, she vanished. The wind shrieked louder and colder, the  
storm clouds drew nearer.

Villagers and Caravaneers spied him trudging back down the path and, except for  
those out forlornly herding the sheep, swarmed together to meet him. Their  
babble surfed around his ears. He gestured vainly for silence. Bulak roared for  
it. As it fell, mumble by mumble, he and Deghred trod forward. "What did

you do  
yonder?" he asked, less impassively than became a headman.  
Cappen had donned his sternest face. "These be mysteries not to be  
spoken of  
until their completion," he declared. "Tomorrow shall see my return to  
them."  
He dared not spend hours relating and explaining, when he had so few.  
Nor did it  
seem wise to admit that thus far, in all likelihood, he had made matters  
worse,  
especially for the travelers.  
Bulak stood foursquare. Deghred gave the bard a searching and skeptical  
look.  
The rest murmured, fingered prayer beads or josses, and otherwise  
registered an  
awe that was useful at the moment but, if disappointed, could well turn  
murderously vengeful.  
Cappen went on headlong. "I must meditate, commune with high Powers, and  
work my  
special magianisms," he said. "For this I require to be alone, well  
sheltered,  
with writing materials and, uh, whatever else I may require."  
Bulak stared. "Suddenly you speak as if born amidst us."  
"Take that as a token of how deep and powerful the mysteries are."  
Cappen forgot  
to keep his voice slowly tolling. "But, but does anybody here know  
Xandran?"  
Wind whistled, clouds swallowed the sun, three ravens flew by like  
forerunners  
of darkness.  
"I have some command of the tongue," said Deghred, almost as if he  
suspected a  
trap.  
"Classical Xandran?" cried Cappen.  
"No. Who does but a few scholars? I mean what they use in those parts  
nowadays—that is, the traders and sailors I've had to do with. And, yes,  
once a  
crew of pirates; but I think that was a different dialect."  
The foolish, fire-on-ice hope died. Still—"I may want to call on what  
knowledge  
you have. That will depend on what my divinations reveal to me. Hold  
yourself  
prepared. Meanwhile, what of my immediate needs?"  
"We have a place," Bulak said. "Lowly, but all we can offer."  
"The spirits take small account of Earthly grandeur," his elder wife  
assured  
them, for whatever that was worth.  
Thus Cappen found himself and his few possessions in the village  
storehouse. It  
was a single room, mainly underground, with just enough walls beneath  
the sod  
roof to allow an entryway. After the door was closed, a lamp gave the  
only  
light. While the space was fairly large, very little was available, for  
it was  
crammed with roots, dried meat, sheepskins, and other odorous goods. The  
air  
hung thick and dank. However, it was out of the wind, and private.  
Too private, maybe. Cappen had nothing to take his mind off his  
thoughts.  
He settled in, a pair of skins between him and the floor, one over his



shoulders. Besides the lamp, he had been given food, a crock of wine, a goblet, a crock for somewhat different purposes, and his tools—a bottle of ink, several quill pens, and a sheaf of paper, articles such as merchants used in their own work. Now he began wondering, more and more frantically, what to do with them. Ordinarily he could have dashed something off. But a canticle in classical Xandran, suitable for a marriage made in heaven? Especially when the cost of its proving unsatisfactory would be widespread death, including his? He did not feel inspired. The language requirement was obstacle enough. His wits twisted to and fro, hunting for a way, any way, around it. Through Deghred, he could now get a doubtless very limited acquaintance with the present-day speech. He recalled hearing that it descended directly from the antique, so much of it must be similar. How would pronunciation have changed, though, and grammar, and even vocabulary? In his days at home he had read certain famous poems five or six hundred years old. It had been difficult; only a lexicon made it possible at all; and the archaic idiom of the Rojan hillmen suggested how alien the verses would have sounded. He glugged a mouthful of wine. It hit an empty stomach and thence sent a faint glow to his head. He did have a bit more to go on. When he concentrated, he could drag scraps of the proper classical up from the forgetfulness in which they had lain. Maybe his newly acquired facility helped with that. But they were just scraps. He had yawned through a year of this as part of the education that even a bastard son of a minor nobleman was supposed to receive, but declensions, conjugations, moods, tenses, and the dismal rest set his attention adrift in the direction of girls, flowery forests, rowdy friends, composing a song of his own that might seduce a girl, or almost anything else. What stayed with him had done so randomly, like snatches of his aunt's moralizings when he was a child and couldn't escape. And then he had Aiala's lyrics. That wasn't by design. Every word clung to him, like the memory of every bit of a certain meal years ago that he had had to eat and praise because the cook was a formidable witch. He feared he would never get rid of either. Still, the thing gave him a partial but presumably trustworthy

model, a basis for comparison and thus for a guesswork sort of reconstruction.  
He drank again. His blood started to buzz faintly, agreeably. Of course, he'd need his reason unimpaired when— if—he got to that task. But "if" was the doomful word. First he needed the poesy, the winged fancy, concepts evoking words that in turn made the concepts live. Anxiety, to give it a euphemistic name, held his imagination in a swamp of glue. And wasn't that metaphor a repulsive symptom of his condition? Anything he might force out of himself would belong in yonder crock.  
So he must lift his heart, free his spirit. Then he could hope his genius would soar. After which he could perhaps render the Caronnais into Xandran without mutilating it beyond recognition. The basic difficulty was that to create under these circumstances he must get drunk, no good condition for a translator. He suspected the necessary degree of drunkenness was such that when he awoke he wouldn't care whether he lived or died—until much too late. The lady of the winds did not expect to be kept waiting. Besides—he spat a string of expletives—she demanded not only words but music.  
The two must go together as naturally as breath and heartbeat, or the song was a botch and a mockery. This meant they must grow side by side, intertwining, shaping one another, as he worked. Oh, usually he could find an existing melody that fitted a poem he had in process, or vice versa. Neither was admissible in this case; both must never have been heard before in the world. He could attempt a double originality, but that, he knew, would only be possible with the Caronnais native to him. To force the subsequent translation into that mold—well, give him a week or two and maybe he might, but since he had only until tomorrow—  
He glugged again. He would doubtless be wise to ballast the wine with food. It wasn't the worst imaginable food, caravaneers' rations, smoked meat and fish, butter, cheese, hardtack, rice cold but lately boiled with leeks and garlic, dried figs and apricots and—On the other hand, he lacked appetite. What use wisdom anyway? He glugged again.  
If this was the end of his wanderings, he thought, it was not quite what he had visualized and certainly far too early. Not that he did well to pity himself. Think of his waymates, think of the poor innocent dwellers throughout these mountains. Surely he had enjoyed much more than them, much more

colorful. It  
behooved a minstrel, a knight of the road, to hark back, as gladly as  
the wine  
enabled.  
Most recently, yes, to Sanctuary. He had had his troubles there, but the  
same  
was true of every place, and the multifarious pleasures much outnumbered  
them.  
Ending with delicious Peridis—may she fare always well—and their last,  
so  
unfortunately interrupted moment—  
He stirred on his sheepskins. By all the nymphs of joy, it happened he  
had  
brought away a souvenir of it! There he could for a while take refuge  
from his  
troubles, other than in drink. And perhaps, said practicality, this  
would  
liberate his genius.  
Groping about, shivering in the chill, he found the book. Cross-legged,  
he  
opened it on his lap and peered through the dim, smoky, smelly  
lamplight.  
The words leaped out at him. They were in no language he had ever heard  
of, nor  
was it anywhere named; but he read it as easily as he did his own,  
instantly  
understanding what everything he came upon referred to. Not that that  
brought  
full knowledge. The world he found was an abstraction, a bubble,  
floating  
cheerfully free in a space and a time beyond his ken. No matter. He  
guessed it  
was almost as airy there.  
The musical notation stood equally clear to him, tunes lilting while he  
scanned  
them. Their scale was not too different from that common in the  
Westlands. He  
would need only a little practice before singing and strumming them in a  
way  
that everybody he met ought to like. What exoticism there was should  
lend  
piquancy. Yes, for his future career—  
Future!  
He sprang to his feet. His head banged against a rafter.

Hastily fetched through biting wind and gathering murk, Deghred in  
Dalagh  
hunkered down and peered at Cappen Varra. "Well, what do you crave of  
me?" he  
asked.  
"In a minute, I pray you." Himself sitting tailor-fashion, the bard  
tried to  
arrange paper, inkpot, and open book for use. Bloody awkward. No help at  
all to  
the image of a knowing and confident rescuer.  
"I've a feeling you're none too sure either," Deghred murmured.  
"But I am! I simply need a bit of assistance. Who doesn't ever? The  
craftsman  
his apprentices, the priest his acolytes, and you a whole gang of

underlings. I  
want no more than a brief... consultation."  
"To what end?" Deghred paused. "They're growing dubious of you. What  
kind of  
Powers are you trying to deal with? What could come of it?"  
"The good of everybody."  
"Or the ruin?"  
"I haven't time to argue." If I did, I suspect you'd be utterly appalled  
and  
make me cease and desist. Then you'd offer an extravagant sacrifice to a  
being  
that no such thing will likely appease—for you haven't met her as I  
have.  
Deghred's voice harshened. "Be warned. If you don't do what you  
promised—"  
"Well, I didn't exactly promise—"  
"My men won't let you leave with us, and I suspect the villagers will  
cast you  
out. They fear you'll carry a curse."  
Cappen was not much surprised. "Suppose, instead, I gain clemency,  
weather as it  
ought to be, and the passes open for you. Will they give me anything  
better than  
thanks? I'm taking a considerable personal risk, you know."  
"Ah, should you succeed, that's different. Although these dwellers be  
poor folk,  
I don't doubt they'd heap skins and pelts at your feet. I'll show you  
how to  
sell the stuff at good prices in Temanhassa."  
"You and your fellow traders are not poor men," said Cappen pointedly.  
"Naturally, you'd find us, ah, not ungenerous."  
"Shall we say a tenth share of the profit from your expedition?"  
"A tenth? How can you jest like that in an hour like this?"  
"Retreating to winter in the Empire would cost more. As you must well  
know,  
who've had to cope year after year with its taxes, bribes, and  
extortionate  
suppliers." Getting snowed in here would be still worse, but Cappen  
thought it  
imprudent to explain that that had become a distinct possibility.  
"We are not misers or ingrates. Nor are we unreasonable. Three percent  
is,  
indeed, lavish."  
"Let us not lose precious time in haggling. Seven and a half."  
"Five, and my friendship, protection, and recommendations to influential  
persons  
in Temanhassa."  
"Done!" said Cappen. He sensed the trader's surprise and a certain  
instinctive  
disappointment. But the need to get on with the work was very real, and  
the  
bargain not a bad one.  
Meanwhile he had arranged his things just barely well enough that he  
could  
begin. Dipping pen in ink, he said, "This is a strange work I must do,  
and  
potent forces are afoot. As yet I cannot tell of it, save to pledge that  
there  
is nothing of evil. As I write, I want you to talk to me in Xandran.  
Naught  
else."

Deghred gaped, remembered his dignity, and replied, "May I wonder why? You do not know that tongue, and I have only some smatterings." "You may wonder if you choose. What you must do is talk." "But what about?" "Anything. Merely keep the words flowing." Deghred groped for a minute. Such an order is not as simple as one might think. Almost desperately, he began: "I have these fine seasonings. They were shipped to me from distant lands at great expense. To you and you alone will I offer them at ridiculously low wholesale prices, because I hold you in such high esteem. Behold, for an ounce of pungent peppercorn, a mere ten zirgats. I look on this not as a loss to me, although it is, but a gift of goodwill." Cappen scribbled. While he listened, the meanings came clear to him. He even mentally made up for the stumblings, hesitations, and thick accent. The language was his to the extent that it was the other man's; and he could have replied with fluency. What slowed him was the search in his mind for words that weren't spoken. "Knot" and "insoluble," for instance. How would one say them?... Ah, yes. Assuming that what he pseudo-remembered was correct. Maybe the connotations were strictly of a rope and of minerals that didn't melt in water. He jotted them down provisionally, but he wanted more context. Deghred stopped. "Go on," Cappen urged. "Well, uh—O barefaced brazen robber! Ten zirgats? If this withered and moldy lot went for two in the bazaar, I would be astounded. Yet, since I too am prepared to take a loss for the sake of our relationship, I will offer three—" "Uh, could you give me something else?" Cappen interrupted. "Speech not so, m-m, commercial?" "What can it be? My dealings with Xandrans are all commercial." "Oh, surely not all. Doing business in itself involves sociability, the cultivation of friendly feelings, does it not? Tell me what might be said at a shared meal over a cup of wine." Deghred pondered before he tried: "How did your sea voyage go? I hope you're not troubled by the heat. It is seldom so hot here at this time of year." "Nothing more—more intimate? Don't men like these ever talk of their families? Of love and marriage?" "Not much. I can't converse with them easily, you know. Women, yes." "Say on." "Well, I remember telling one fellow, when he asked, that the best whorehouse in the city is the Purple Lotus. Especially if you can get Zerasa. By Kalat's cloven hoof, what a wench! Plump and sweet as a juicy plum, sizzling as a spit-roasted rump roast, and the tricks she knows—" Deghred reminisced in

considerable detail.

It wasn't quite what Cappen had meant. Still, association evoked words also  
amorous, but apparently decorous. His pen flew, scrawling, scratching  
out,  
spattering the paper and his tunic. When Degredh ended with a gusty  
sigh, Cappen  
had enough.

"Good," he said. "My thanks—albeit this is toward the end of saving your  
own  
well-being and prosperity too. You may go now. Five percent, remember."  
The merchant rose and stretched himself as well as the roof allowed. "If  
naught  
else, that was a small respite from reality. Ah, well. You do have  
hopes? Are  
you coming along?"  
"No," said Cappen. "My labors are just beginning."

Day broke still and cloudless but cruelly cold. Breath smoked white,  
feet  
crunched ice. When he emerged at midmorning, Cappen found very few folk  
outdoors. Those stared at him out of their own frozen silence. The rest  
were  
huddled inside, keeping warm while they waited to learn their fate. It  
was as if  
the whole gigantic land held its breath.  
He felt no weariness, he could not. He seemed almost detached from  
himself, his  
head light but sky-clear. His left arm cradled the harp. Tucked into his  
belt  
was a folded sheet of paper, but he didn't expect any need to refer to  
it. The  
words thereon were graven into him, together with their music. They  
certainly  
should be. The gods of minstrelsy knew—or would have known, if they  
weren't so  
remote from this wild highland—how he had toiled over the lyrics,  
searching  
about, throwing away effort after effort, inch by inch finding his way  
to a  
translation that fitted the notes and was not grossly false to the  
original, and  
at last, not satisfied but with time on his heels, had rehearsed over  
and over  
and over for his audience of turnips and sheepskins.  
Now he must see how well it played for a more critical listener.  
If it succeeded, if he survived, the first part of the reward he'd claim  
was to  
be let to sleep undisturbed until next sunrise. How remotely that bliss  
glimmered!  
He trudged onward, scarcely thinking about anything, until he came to  
the altar.  
There he took stance, gazed across the abyss to peaks sword-sharp  
against  
heaven, and said, "My lady, here I am in obedience to your command."  
It sounded unnaturally loud. No echo responded, no wings soared  
overhead, he  
stood alone in the middle of aloneness.  
After a while, he said, "I repeat, begging my lady's pardon, that here I

am with  
that which I promised you."  
The least of breezes stirred. It went like liquid across his face and  
into his  
nostrils. In so vast a silence, he heard it whisper.  
"I humbly hope my offering will please you and all the gods," he said.  
And there she was, awesome and beautiful before him. A phantom wind  
tossed her  
hair and whirled snow-sparkles around her whiteness. "Well?" she  
snapped.  
Could she too, even she, have been under strain? He doffed his cap and  
bowed  
low. "If my lady will deign to heed, I've created an epithalamium such  
as she  
desires, and have the incomparable honor of rendering it unto her, to be  
known  
forever after as her unique gift at the turning of the winter."  
"That was quick, after you protested you could not."  
"The thought of you inspired me as never ere now have I been inspired."  
"To make it out of nothing?"  
"Oh, no, my lady. Out of experience, and whatever talent is mine, and,  
above all  
else, as I confessed, the shining vision of my lady. I swear, and take  
for  
granted you can immediately verify, that neither melody nor lyrics were  
ever  
heard in this world, Heaven or Earth or the Elsewhere, before I prepared  
them  
for you."  
He doubted that she could in fact scan space and time at once, so  
thoroughly.  
But no matter. He did not doubt that Nerigo kept his half-illicit  
arcanum and  
whatever came to it through his mirror that was not a mirror well sealed  
against  
observation human and nonhuman. Whatever gods had the scope and power to  
spy on  
him must also have much better things to do.  
Aiala's glance lingered more than it pierced. "I do not really wish to  
destroy  
you, Cappen Varra," she told him slowly. "You have a rather charming way  
about  
you. But— should you disappoint me—you will understand that one does  
have one's  
position to maintain."  
"Oh, absolutely. And how better could a man perish than in striving to  
serve  
such a lady? Yet I dare suggest that you will find my ditty acceptable."  
The glorious eyes widened. The slight mercurial shivers almost ceased.  
"Sing,  
then," she said low.  
"Allow me first to lay forth what the purpose is. Unless I am grievously  
mistaken, it is to provide an ode to nuptial joy. Now, my thought was  
that this  
is best expressed in the voice of the bride. The groom is inevitably  
impatient  
for nightfall. She, though, however happy, may at the same time be a  
little  
fearful, certain of loving kindness yet, in her purity, unsure what to  
await and  
what she can do toward making the union rapturous. Khaiantai is

otherwise. She  
is a goddess, and here is an annual renewal. My song expresses her  
rapture in  
tones of unbounded gladness."  
Aiala nodded. "That's not a bad theme," she said, perhaps a trifle  
wistfully.  
"Therefore, my lady, pray bear with my conceit, in the poetic sense,  
that she  
sings with restrained abandon, in colloquial terms of revelry, not  
always  
classically correct. For we have nothing to go on about that save the  
writings  
of the learned, do we? There must have been more familiar speech among  
lesser  
folk, commoners, farmers, herders, artisans, lowly but still the  
majority, the  
backbone of the nation and the salt of the earth. To them too, to the  
Life Force  
that is in them, should the paeon appeal."  
"You may be right," said Aiala with a tinge of exasperation. "Let me  
hear."  
While he talked, Cappen Varra, in the presence of one who fully knew the  
language, mentally made revisions. Translating, he had chosen phrasings  
that  
lent themselves to it.  
The moment was upon him. He took off his gloves, gripped the harp,  
strummed it,  
and cleared his throat.  
"We begin with a chorus," he said. Therewith he launched into song.  
Bridegroom and bride!  
Knot that's insoluble,  
Voices all voluble,  
Hail it with pride.—  
She hearkened. Her bosom rose and fell.  
Now the bride herself sings.  
When a merry maiden marries,  
Sorrow goes and pleasure tarries;  
Every sound becomes a song,  
All is right, and nothing's wrong!—  
He saw he had captured her, and continued to the bacchanalian end.  
"Sullen night  
is laughing day— All the year is merry May!  
The chords rang into stillness. Cappen waited. But he knew. A huge, warm  
easing  
rose in him like a tide.  
"That is wonderful," Aiala breathed. "Nothing of the kind, ever before—"  
"It is my lady's," he said with another bow, while he resumed his cap  
and  
gloves.  
She straightened into majesty. "You have earned what you shall have.  
Henceforward until the proper winter, the weather shall smile, the  
dwellers  
shall prosper, and you and your comrades shall cross my mountains free  
of all  
hindrance."  
"My lady overwhelms me," he thought it expedient to reply.  
For a heartbeat, her grandeur gave way, ever so slightly. "I could  
almost wish  
that you—But no. Farewell, funny mortal."  
She leaned over. Her lips brushed his. He felt as if struck by soft  
lightning.



Then she was gone. It seemed to him that already the air grew more mild.  
For a short while before starting back with his news he stood silent  
beneath the  
sky, suddenly dazed. His free hand strayed to the paper at his belt.  
Doubtless  
he would never know more about this than he now did. Yet he wished that  
someday,  
somehow, if only in another theatrical performance, he could see the  
gracefully  
gliding boats of the Venetian gondoliers.

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